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LAURENCE SICKMAN



LAURENCE SICKMAN

A Tribute

Edited by Michael Churchman

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
Kansas City, Missouri
1988



LAURENCE SICKMAN

CONTENTS

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Page

Acknowledgements	The Editor	vi
Foreword	The Trustees	1
Memorial Eulogy	Dr. Thomas Lawton	3
Curator and Director	Ross and Kathleen Taggart	7
Charles Lang Freer Medal Address of Acceptance	Laurence Sickman	11
Columbia University Doctor of Humane Letters Address	Marc F. Wilson	17
Laurence Sickman in his own Words		
I. Harvard-Yenching Fellowship		23
II. The Last Emperor P'u-yi		29
Buddhist Stele	Wai-kam Ho	31
The Empress as Donor with Attendants	Laurence Sickman	35
Reminiscences of Laurence Sickman	Sir Harold Acton	38
Harold Acton in Peking	Laurence Sickman	40
Bibliography		43

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M.C.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Laurence Sickman at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1977	Frontispiece
Laurence Sickman at home about 1953	6
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art	9
The Charles Lang Freer Medal presented to Laurence Sickman, 1973	10
The Hills Gold Medal presented to Laurence Sickman, 1978	15
Ma Yüan, <i>Composing Poetry on a Spring Outing</i> , a scroll long sought by Laurence Sickman and finally captured in 1963	19
Laurence Sickman en route to China, 1930	22
Chinese house of Laurence Sickman, Peking, 1930's	24
Laurence Sickman in Loyang, 1932	27
Ch'en Shun, <i>Lotus</i> , handscroll acquired directly from the last Emperor of China	28
<i>Buddhist Stele</i>	30
<i>The Empress as Donor with Attendants</i> reassembled fragments of the relief from the Lung-men caves	34
Letter of Thomas Hart Benton to Laurence Sickman, August 15, 1956	42

FOREWORD

The death of Laurence Sickman deprives The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and the Kansas City community of a distinguished scholar of Chinese art and an outstanding leader in the field of American art museums.

It was Laurence Sickman who created the collections of Chinese art which give The Nelson-Atkins Museum its international reputation. From 1930 to 1935 he was resident in Peking and acted for the Nelson Trustees in acquiring the core of the Oriental collection. Appointed in 1935 Curator of Oriental Art, he became Vice-Director in 1946 and succeeded Paul Gardner in 1953 as the second Director of The Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum. He retired in 1977, becoming Director Emeritus and Adviser to the Trustees. Throughout his long and distinguished career he used his talents and energies to strengthen the Museum and its collections and to enhance opportunities for his colleagues in the growing field of Oriental studies.

It was a privilege for us to know Larry Sickman and to work with him for the enrichment of The Nelson-Atkins Museum. It would be remiss of us not to record the productive collaboration which he enjoyed also with our predecessors J. C. Nichols, Herbert V. Jones, Robert B. Caldwell, Milton McGreevy, David T. Beals, Jr., and Cliff C. Jones. With Milton McGreevy he also shared a deep interest in their alma mater Harvard.

A full scholarly biography, with selections from his letters, will doubtless follow. Nicholas S. Pickard has made extensive notes of his conversations with Laurence Sickman which will be immensely useful to his biographer. Meanwhile, this small volume is both memorial and celebration. It is intended as a tribute to the accomplishments of a much-respected friend and guide.

Menefee D. Blackwell
Herman R. Sutherland
Donald J. Hall

June, 1988

THE NELSON-ATKINS MUSEUM OF ART

MEMORIAL SERVICE

LAURENCE CHALFANT STEVENS SICKMAN

Born August 27, 1906, Denver, Colorado

Died May 7, 1988, Kansas City, Missouri

A Memorial Service for Laurence Sickman was held on May 11, 1988 at 11 o'clock in Atkins Auditorium at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. The Museum's fourth Director, Marc F. Wilson, paid tribute to his predecessor, mentor, and friend in introductory remarks. Menefee D. Blackwell, the Museum's senior Trustee, read the Lesson (*Ecclesiastes* 3:1-11); and the Reverend Roy V. Finnell offered prayers. The Eulogy was delivered by Dr. Thomas Lawton, Director of the Freer-Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

LAURENCE SICKMAN

By Thomas Lawton¹

It was more than thirty years ago that I came to The Nelson-Atkins Museum and, for the first time, asked to see some Chinese paintings. I had written in advance to make an appointment. But you can imagine my surprise, nonetheless, when I found that the person who would be showing the paintings to me in storage was Laurence Sickman, the director of the museum.

It certainly was evident to him within the first few minutes of that meeting, so many years ago, that I knew virtually nothing about Chinese painting. Still, he patiently unrolled the scrolls and discussed each of them with me — explaining questions of brushwork, the placement of signatures and the authenticity of seals — as if I were an accomplished connoisseur. Never, not even for a moment, was there any indication on his part that I might be wasting his time, or that my comments about the paintings — however uncertain and uninformed — might not be worthy of the most careful consideration. Instead, he was enthusiastic about the opportunity to discuss Chinese art and Chinese culture. And I quickly shared in his enthusiasm.

I have always remembered that initial meeting with Laurence Sickman. For, as I visited other museums of Asian art around the world, I soon learned that the directors, regardless of their expertise, did not make a habit of showing objects from their collections to fledgling students.

Laurence Sickman and I subsequently became good friends. It was a friendship that I have always regarded as the most important of my life. And, over the years, I came to understand that the courtesy and the generosity he extended to me then, at that first meeting, were characteristic of his behavior toward everyone who came to visit his museum. Part of that extraordinary sensitivity for others can be explained by the fact that, caring so much for Chinese art himself, he felt an obligation to share his knowledge and his enthusiasm with others. And share it he did, tirelessly and without regard for the personal time and effort involved, with the result that anyone who is concerned with Chinese art — whether in the United States, Europe, or in the Far East — owes an intellectual debt to Laurence Sickman.

¹Dr. Thomas Lawton is the former Director of the Freer Gallery of Art and Founding Director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. He is currently Senior Researcher at the Freer and Sackler Galleries.

But, yet another element in Laurence Sickman's remarkable attitude toward people, toward colleagues and friends, was a reflection of the essential character of the man. He embodied a graciousness of spirit that transcended the usual attitudes of a scholar-connoisseur in the Western sense. He was, rather, the epitome of the Chinese literatus: someone who had absorbed the very essence of human relationships and of human aspirations and, consequently, was at ease with himself and with the world around him.

Certainly very few museum directors are willing or, indeed, able to involve themselves with exchanges between the public and their collections as did Laurence Sickman. To my mind, he was able to walk so easily where other scholars did not dare to tread because, to him, there was no distinction between understanding the highest of human cultural achievements and living one's life in such a way as to reflect those same achievements.

For many people, the first acquaintance with Laurence Sickman came from reading *The Art and Architecture of China*, a book that first appeared in 1956. Quite aside from the careful judgments and perceptive analyses of Chinese art, the book is written with an enviable literary style. Small wonder that it quickly became a classic and has been reprinted many times. Today, when new studies on every possible aspect of Chinese art are appearing virtually every week, *The Art and Architecture of China* still remains the finest single volume on the history of Chinese culture....

Laurence Sickman was equally generous in sharing his knowledge about all aspects of Chinese art. And, I might add in passing that few other specialists in Chinese art today can speak with his authority about so many different areas of China's extraordinary cultural achievements. His almost intuitive awareness of quality when selecting art objects prompted Laurence Sickman's colleagues to regard him with awe and envy. He was, in a very real sense, a curator's curator, just as he was a director's director....

Perhaps my fondest memories are of the four weeks we spent together in China in 1975, shortly after it became possible for Americans to travel there. We were part of a delegation sponsored by the Committee for Scholarly Communications with the People's Republic of China. No one knew what we should expect from our hosts. After all, formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China had not existed since 1949.

We arrived at the airport in Peking and, as is customary in China, were quickly taken into a huge reception room and given tea while our Chinese hosts introduced themselves. Then we were introduced. And, you will not be surprised to hear that the rest of us were acknowledged by a noncommittal nod of the head. But when Laurence Sickman's name was spoken, there was a murmur of recognition and, for the first time, smiles of acknowledgment. Here, after all, was someone whom the Chinese realized should be taken seriously.

All of us who are here this morning had the good fortune to know Laurence Sickman and to work closely with him. We are familiar with the many honors and awards that were so deservedly bestowed upon him during his lifetime. We are also familiar with the superb art collection that is assembled and displayed in the museum in which we are seated. That collection and this museum speak more eloquently than anything else of his many distinguished achievements.

In the years to come, when visitors enjoy the treasures of The Nelson-Atkins Museum, they too will share something of the esteem and affection we feel for Laurence Sickman. When, however, they ask — as certainly they will — to know more about this remarkable man, there can, I think, be no more appropriate response than to say to them, "If you would like to learn more about Laurence Sickman and about those things that mattered to him, just look about you."



Laurence Sickman, about 1953, when he was appointed second Director of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

CURATOR AND DIRECTOR

By Ross and Kathleen Taggart¹

When Laurence Sickman was named Director of The Nelson Gallery in 1953, Kojiro Tomita, the distinguished curator of Japanese art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, bemoaned the loss of such a brilliant scholar to the tedium of administration. But to those of us who were privileged to work with him at the Gallery on a day-to-day basis it was obvious that in his direction of the Museum he was always guided by his instincts as a collector and his zeal for scholarship.

Mr. Sickman was one of the great American collectors of his generation. He did not collect for himself (except, as he admitted, a few imperfect things) but rather for the public, specifically for the people of Kansas City through the medium of the Nelson. The integrity and the reputation of his institution were of first importance to him. His acumen as a collector was undoubtedly sharpened by his experiences in the Orient. Added to his ability to read Chinese came the scholarship and the unerring eye, akin to perfect pitch, which aided him first as Curator of Oriental Art and later as Director to select a collection of objects of first quality. He bent every effort to acquire not only works of art but also the books necessary to help his curators, docents, and students understand them. He exercised exasperating frugality in all other expenditures in order to conserve funds for acquisition.

Mr. Sickman's knowledge of art was catholic. His profound specialties, as expressed in a letter of the 'thirties, were Chinese bronzes and paintings. To this level of specialization the study of Buddhist art was added in later years. To other fields of study he brought understanding and especially a feeling for quality whether in the area of Old Master drawings, Renaissance painting, or art of the twentieth century. He had a continuing interest in the decorative arts, both Oriental and European — a field only recently acknowledged in the academic world and collected by only a few American museums.

Honorary degrees conferred on Laurence Sickman by five universities attest to his ability as an educator. Two years after his return from China, in November 1937, he was offered a three-year post at Harvard as a Fellow for

¹Ross E. Taggart is retired Senior Curator, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and his wife Kathleen was Executive Secretary to The Society of Fellows.

Research in Oriental Art. As tempting as this invitation was as a means to further study — “for I consider myself much more in the light of a student than as a teacher” — in the end he turned it down. He wrote Edward Forbes at the Fogg, “Having had the almost unparalleled opportunity of helping to build up the collection here [at the Nelson] I naturally don't feel that I can sever all association with it.” Over the years, for similar reasons, he declined many museum posts and accepted only short-term professorships unless they were in the Kansas City vicinity. Recently found in Mr. Sickman's desk, a treasured letter from a longtime patron of the Museum expresses gratitude for years of learning from him, first as student, later as volunteer worker, and now as Associate Trustee. There are many whose lives have been similarly enriched by his generosity in sharing his learning and wisdom.

In his early years at the Gallery Laurence Sickman shared with Director Paul Gardner the giving of weekly Wednesday night lectures. His unique experiences and felicitous manner of expression always made him a delightful dinner companion or entertaining lecturer. Though naturally a profound thinker and widely-read scholar, he always put his listener at ease whatever the age or level of understanding. His lectures far and near as well as his published books and articles brought visitors to Kansas City from around the world. Even in retirement his studies continued as he worked on articles for publication or shared the scholarly research problems of former colleagues and graduate students.

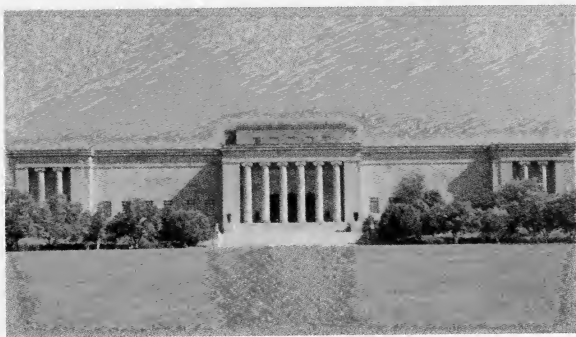
As a corollary to his own interest in learning, he actively fostered the growth of the Museum library through the steady acquisition of books, journals, and sales catalogues. When space grew too small he encouraged Helen Spencer to build underground and provide the spacious library which now serves the Museum's professional staff as well as students and visitors.

To the staff of the Nelson, Laurence Sickman was an inspiration and a challenge. His wide circle of friendships, both international and in this country, and his membership on many foundations and inter-museum committees, kept him abreast of activities in the art world here and abroad. His intellectual curiosity and keen interest in history forged courteous relationships with collectors and dealers. In a way he brought the larger world back to his own doorstep and so broadened the outlook of those who worked with him. Aware of the benefits of his own foreign study, he encouraged curators to seek fellowships and opportunities for travel and study. Always looking to the future, he constantly sought ways to improve the Museum's services and to raise the quality of its exhibitions.

As curator and eventually as director among curators and staff Laurence Sickman generously recognized and respected the ability and talents of each colleague. His belief in his students and co-workers frequently inspired them to achieve far more than they ever imagined they could. Never one to take

credit for the work of another, he was often over-generous in his praise.

For many years he led The Nelson-Atkins Museum to the place of honor which it holds today. At his death he was still an adviser to the trustees. The lives of all who knew and worked with him will always be abundantly richer and more productive for the experience.



THE NELSON-ATKINS MUSEUM OF ART

THE CHARLES LANG FREER MEDAL



The Freer Gallery of Art, of the Smithsonian Institution, presented the fifth Charles Lang Freer Medal to Laurence Sickman on September 11, 1973, at Washington, D.C. After an introduction by Dr. Harold P. Stern, Director of the Freer Gallery, the presentation was made by Senator Hugh Scott who read the citation:

For Distinguished Contribution to the Knowledge and Understanding of Oriental Civilizations as Reflected in their Arts: Laurence Sickman.



Excerpts from the
Address of Acceptance
THE CHARLES LANG FREER MEDAL
by Laurence Sickman

The Charles Lang Freer Medal has always held for me a place of high esteem, admiration and respect. At no time had it entered my thoughts that it should be offered to me. My surprise was profound and my emotions a mixture of justified reluctance and of gratitude to the Smithsonian Institution and the Freer Gallery for choosing me as a recipient.

On the one hand I sincerely share the sentiment of a Yüan dynasty official who tried to excuse himself when requested to compose a stele inscription, saying, "As an official I have done nothing extraordinary nor brought to conclusion the slightest matter, and so I am constantly disconcerted in the presence of my colleagues." On the other hand my admiration of all the Freer Gallery stands for in quality and in scholarship impels me to accept this honor as a tangible link with an institution I have held to be the ideal of its kind.

I have had the good fortune to know the four directors, John Lodge, Archibald Wenley, John Pope, and the present incumbent, Harold Stern, as well as most members of its gifted staff. Over the years I have watched the collections expanded through the acquisition of works of the highest quality in every category of Asian art — a growth worthily complemented by a long series of scholarly publications.

On this Fiftieth Anniversary of the Freer Gallery, I wish to talk briefly of the progress in Far Eastern studies that has come about in the past half century and to which the Freer has contributed so much. I must beg your forgiveness and your indulgence for the personal and autobiographical nature of much I say. I have tried, but could find no other way than to use some past circumstances of my own career for contrast with the present.

It was, I believe, when I was 17 years old I came to the conviction that, since I must find an occupation in life, the most gratifying would be that of a Curator of Oriental Art. Perhaps the prospect was all the more Utopian because I knew absolutely nothing about such an occupation and there was no one — family, friend or mentor — who could advise me. My motivation was enthusiasm for rather than any knowledge about the arts of China. Nevertheless I approached the matter in a direct manner and wrote to every curator of Oriental art in the country, asking advice and explaining my ambitions in a necessarily vague and amateur way. Now there were not, you

must surely know, many such people in the art museum field at that time, but I wrote them all. I had one reply, one gracious and helpful reply concluding with an invitation to call on the writer and discuss my interest with him. You will understand better, perhaps, the significance of this evening to me when I say that my one letter came from John Ellerton Lodge, Director of the Freer Gallery of Art. In this way began the chain of events that led to a curatorial post.

Many experiences and events must be telescoped. I had my interview with John Lodge, a rather formidable occasion for me in spite of his kindness. I followed his advice to the extent of my abilities. He told me to go to Harvard and to learn Chinese. I accomplished the former; after an interval, but the latter skill still eludes me. I must add with a sense of the deepest gratitude, that throughout my student days and later, John Lodge remained a helpful guide and friendly advisor.

I may well be mistaken, but I believe that in the mid-20's Harvard was the only university offering courses in Chinese and Japanese art. By a curious turn of events and because Langdon Warner was on sabbatical, my first instructor in the art of the Far East was the celebrated French Sinologist, Paul Pelliot, visiting lecturer at Harvard that year. This was a remarkable opportunity only partially exploited by reason of my lack of training. Much of the instruction was quite beyond me. The course was entitled "Survey of Chinese Art" and I do recall that by the end of the semester we had reached the opening years of the Former Han Dynasty.

The study of Chinese art at Harvard in the late 20's had about it a distinct Japanese aura. Okakura Kakuzo had left a powerful heritage of thought in Boston; my life-long friend, Kojiro Tomita was curator of Oriental art at the Museum of Fine Arts, and Langdon Warner, my preceptor, had had his early training in Japan. It is understandable, then, that Buddhist sculpture and painting enjoyed the strongest favor. Other categories of painting were not neglected, especially the landscape of Southern Sung, but the art of painting seemed to end rather abruptly with the fourteenth century.

In mentioning some of the influences of my student days, it would be impossible to neglect that of Dr. Denman Ross who, although retired, consented to give me a special course on a subject of which he was the established master — that of qualitative judgment, or connoisseurship. What modicum of eye I may have is thanks in large part to his tutelage and, at a later time and in Peking, that of Dr. Otto Burchard.

In 1930 began my years of residence in Peking on a Harvard-Yenching Fellowship, an experience remarkable in every way and one that lasted until the early winter of 1935.

I will refrain from talking at length about my years in Peking, but a few aspects may be of some interest. With my undergraduate conditioning I

continued to follow my interest in Buddhist sculpture and traveled extensively throughout North China visiting Buddhist cave sites and temples, especially those of Shansi Province that remained from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries. This is, I believe, the area richest in surviving Buddhist architecture, sculpture and wall-paintings, and one that will justify much concentrated study.

In 1931 Langdon Warner accepted an appointment as adviser in Oriental art to the yet unbuilt Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City. That same year he came to Peking and in his company I had my first opportunity to visit some of the dealers in antiquities in the famous shops of Ta-erh Hutung and Liu-li-ch'ang. This latter street, outside the Ch'ien-men Gate, had long been celebrated for the shops that lined both sides of its winding length — shops dealing in books, rubbings, equipment for the scholar's desk, paintings and antiquities of all kinds.

On his return to the United States, Langdon Warner suggested to the Nelson Gallery trustees, none of whom I had met, that I might, as the chances arose, recommend acquisitions for the as yet unformed collection of Chinese art. In this way and at that time was established my association with the Nelson Gallery that continues to the present. It was an opportunity heavily charged with responsibility, requiring more nerve and confidence than I really had at the time. As a beginner one can safely admire a painting or bronze exhibited in a museum and labeled, presumably, by an expert. The same work of art unlabeled, without provenance and in the market place can be another thing altogether. And speaking of the market place, all our acquisitions were made just there, for the most part in Peking and a few from the less renowned dealers of Shanghai. With a few notable exceptions, the larger part of the Nelson collection of Chinese paintings was actually assembled from Japanese and American sources.

In those halcyon days for collectors, the dealers of Peking offered artifacts and works of art reflecting every aspect of Chinese material culture from neolithic pottery to the obsolete paraphernalia of the former Manchu court. The better dealers were scholarly men, knowledgeable about rare books, old rubbings, ceramics and antiquities. For example there was Huang Po-ch'uan, a really distinguished specialist in ancient bronzes and jades who, moreover, was always willing to share his knowledge with a neophyte.

In the autumn of 1935 I returned to the United States, via India and the Near East. That same year I became, at last, the curator of Oriental Art in a museum that had opened but two years before. I was scarcely installed in my new post when I traveled to London, in the early winter of 1936, to attend the epoch-making Burlington House exhibition of Chinese art, the largest ever assembled. There I met that unique coterie of collectors and experts who had organized the exhibition and lent to it — Sir Percival David,

George Eumorfopoulos, R. L. Hobson, Oscar Raphael, H. J. Oppenheim and many others.

Among the scholars were Arthur Waley, Percival Yetts, Osvald Sirén, an old friend, and also my first teacher, Paul Pelliot.

Today I look back on the Burlington House Exhibition and its attendant events as my official inauguration or commencement. The year was 1936.

Here Sickman recalled the "scarce handful of colleagues" that he had in 1936 and then surveyed the course of scholarship and collecting at the few American museums which had significant Oriental departments, starting with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and continuing with the Metropolitan, the Freer Gallery, and the museums at Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, and Kansas City. Honolulu and Seattle also began to build collections of Oriental art.

"Parallel to this rapid expansion in public holdings," he added "came the great private collections" of such men as Charles Bain Hoyt, Alfred Pillsbury and Grenville Winthrop.

The latter part of his Address reviewed the progress of Far Eastern studies from the late 1920's to 1973.

Today Chinese language programs, on both the graduate and undergraduate levels, have been established on a nationwide scale, while instruction in Chinese history, philosophy, economics, literature and the arts has reached a level of notable sophistication. To these factors must be added the presence of a number of distinguished Chinese scholars in our academic life.... There has come about a shift in vision from that of the outsider looking in, exemplified by the beautiful and sensitive prose of Laurence Binyon, to a conscious attempt to approach Chinese art from the point of view of those who made it and those who evaluated it in their own cultural terms. Here Arthur Waley pointed the way long ago.

Sickman summarized the new scholarship as focusing on painting, especially the literati painters and critics, and on the immensely significant archaeological discoveries by teams of the People's Republic of China.

He concluded his Address thus:

I have tried to outline, if ever so briefly, some of the factors that have manifestly advanced the cause of Far Eastern scholarship in America. The symposiums held here in the Jubilee year of the Freer Gallery are clear evidence of our progress toward a more meaningful understanding of the arts of Asia. At this point I must confess my own chagrin at having contributed so little to our knowledge about the arts of China. But I have derived some consolation from a casual remark made by John Lodge. On one of the last occasions when I saw him, he said, "I have in my life published very little, but look about the Freer Gallery because that is my publication."

By what to me is a truly remarkable coincidence, it was just fifty years ago I had my first meeting with John Lodge in the newly opened Gallery in a room very near this auditorium. It is, then, with the mixed feelings of humility and the enjoyment of a climax that I accept the honor of the Charles Lang Freer Medal.



In addition to the Freer Medal, Laurence Sickman was also awarded in 1968 The Royal Order of Knight Commander of the North Star by the King of Sweden and in 1978 The Hills Gold Medal (shown above) by the Oriental Ceramic Society, London.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

A dinner was held at the Century Association, 7 West 43rd Street, New York, on May 19, 1977, to honor Laurence Sickman on the occasion of his receiving the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters *Honoris Causa* from Columbia University.

Those present to celebrate were:

Mrs. George H. Bunting, Jr.
Mr. and Mrs. John Canaday
Mr. Cornelius Chang
Mr. Ralph T. Coe
Mr. John M. Crawford, Jr.
Mr. and Mrs. William Theodore De Bary
Mr. and Mrs. Myron S. Falk, Jr.
Professor and Mrs. Alfred Frazier
Professor L. Carrington Goodrich
Mr. Lincoln Kirstein
Mr. and Mrs. Milton McGreevy
Dr. Miyeko Murase
Mr. Charles Ryskamp
Dr. Morris Saffron
Mr. Laurence Sickman
Mr. and Mrs. Herman R. Sutherland
Mr. and Mrs. Wango Weng
Mr. and Mrs. Marc F. Wilson

The following address was given by Marc F. Wilson.

LAURENCE SICKMAN

by Marc F. Wilson¹

For a young man who had been born and raised in the twilight of Colorado's frontier mining days, rich in memories of frontier folklore and visits of Buffalo Bill to the family home, going off to Harvard in 1926 for Chinese studies, to learn what one needed to become a curator of Far Eastern art, must have seemed the fulfillment of boyhood dreams, dreams filled with innocent enthusiasm and unquestioning assurance. And yet, had one looked with a cold eye toward the future, there could have been only slender grounds for optimism. Among all the great American universities there was, after all, only Harvard where a Laurence Sickman might pursue the study of things Chinese—language, history, art. How could one make a career as a curator of Far Eastern art when only three museums, all in a narrow corridor along the eastern coast, were actively committed to the subject? Indeed, in 1926, the trans-Mississippi West had not so much as one art museum worthy of the name, much less any with a vital department of Oriental art. Kansas City had no art museum, not even plans for one, really. The Nelson Gallery existed only as an item in the will of a wealthy newspaper publisher. Of uncertain future, none knew what direction it might take, what its scope might be, or even how large a structure it would be and what that might look like. The odds favored a slough of mediocrity, but the chance for brilliance was there.

Few times have fate and talent coincided so perfectly as in the career of Laurence Sickman. Unerring judgment in matters of taste and connoisseurship combined with an uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time. Out of this has come one of the most rewarding and influential careers a man could hope to have. Fifty years later, the Far Eastern studies profession could boast some 6,000 members; and there is not a state in the union where Chinese literature, language, and history are not taught in institutions of higher education, and with an expertise unimaginable in 1926. Major museum collections of Oriental art now number at least ten, while west of the Mississippi there are at least fifteen art museums

¹Marc F. Wilson, Curator of Oriental Art since 1973, appointed Director in 1982, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

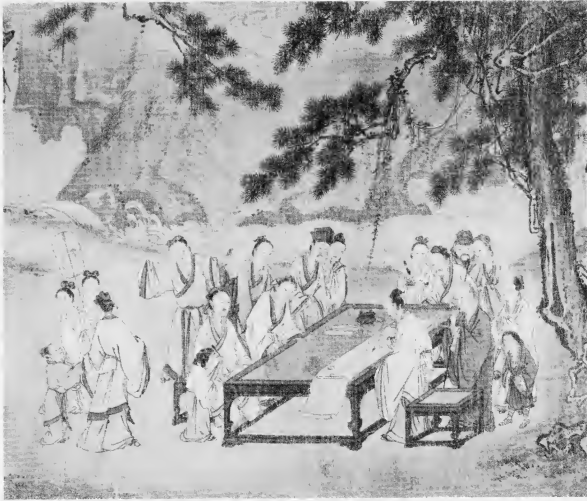
now well worthy of the name and of anyone's attention. The jewel of these is Kansas City's Nelson Gallery. In all of this, Laurence Sickman has played an instrumental and even crucial role, whether in shaping and honing the Nelson Gallery, a process that seems almost congruent with the man himself, or in bringing wise counsel and positive stimulus to the growth of museums and Far Eastern studies across the nation. It is Sickman who often says of his own career, "The things I seek are seeking me."

To have taken Chinese studies at Harvard in the late 1920's was to be blessed by a remarkable series of coincidences. The great French Sinologist Paul Pelliot would be one's first teacher, giving access to the truly heroic Sinological and linguistic accomplishments of a gifted group of European scholars, the revered pioneers of the field. To study under Pelliot meant receiving a painstaking training in Chinese classics and history and in Buddhist monuments. True to traditional Chinese Sinology, it was not the art in the objects that was emphasized but the importance of their inscriptions to historical accounts.

Then, in 1928, the ancient capital of Yin was discovered at An-yang, proving beyond all doubt the historicity of the Shang, whose very existence had been vigorously denied in Pelliot's first course. Fabulous bronzes and objects of a quality and presence unknown began to make their way into public and private collections, sending waves of wonder and curiosity through the art world and scholarly community.

There were other great teachers, too. Kojiro Tomita, Denman Ross and Langdon Warner in Boston; and Grenville Winthrop in New York. From Ross and Winthrop one could really learn the meaning of quality and connoisseurship. Tomita and Warner set an underlying tone to Far Eastern art studies, one with a lingering Japanese aura that looked first to Buddhist painting and sculpture. What was taught about other Chinese painting was confined to misty Southern Sung-style paintings in Japanese taste. For all this, however, China might just as well have ceased to exist with the Sung dynasty. Later painting and ceramics were dismissed as being decadent.

The early thirties in Peking were halcyon days. China had been opened up. Indeed, it had never been more accessible in all its facets. Its Palace Museum made the old Imperial collection available; and skilled tutors, vestiges from a dying system, could be had to teach language, painting, history or whatever struck one's fancy. Daily lessons in painting led to an unusual corpus of paintings known as "Early Sickmans," and quite passable, even good, they are, and in whatever style you might favor. Landscapes in the style of Ma Yüan or Wang Fu, or perhaps a windblown bamboo after Li K'an, these served as the training ground for "telling the fish eyes from the pearls."



Ma Yüan (attributed) *Composing Poetry on a Spring Outing* (detail), Southern Sung (1127-1279), handscroll in ink and slight color on silk (63-19).

Laurence Sickman first proposed the handscroll attributed to Ma Yüan, *Composing Poetry on a Spring Outing*, for purchase by the Nelson Trustees in 1931, but Langdon Warner vetoed the recommendation, to Sickman's intense disappointment. In later years he pursued it in vain through the famous dealers Dr. Otto Burchard and Mr. C. T. Loo. Thirty years afterwards while he was walking up Madison Avenue, Sickman spied the scroll in a Parke-Bernet catalogue, opened to the very page, in their display window. He moved quickly to acquire it at the auction and got it for a trifling sum. The moral of this long quest, Sickman said in his reminiscences to the Fellows on November 15, 1983, was best expressed by Robert Louis Stevenson when he wrote, "The things I seek are seeking me."

In 1931, when the Trustees of the as yet unbuilt Nelson Gallery in Kansas City contracted with Laurence Sickman to purchase Chinese works of art for their museum, the timing could not have been better, nor the competition tougher. There were many people buying in Peking. The firms of C. T. Loo and of Yamanaka, backed by incredible resources, contrived to skim the cream of midnight peasant archaeology with a network of runners covering all northern China. To face a work of art raw and unattested in the marketplace is quite a different thing from the security of a museum setting and its expert labeling. Buying takes a certain confidence, but as Sickman maintains, what really takes nerve and decisiveness is not to buy, to wait until just the right object comes along, the one that fits the ideal image in the mind's eye. The battle, then, is not with the dealers, but with oneself.

Of the innumerable buyers in Peking in the twenties and thirties, appallingly few acquired works that have stood the test of time and scholarly scrutiny. So successful was Laurence Sickman that by the age of thirty he had built the basic structure of one of the world's finest collections of Chinese art. In 1935 one of the major lenders to the epoch-making Burlington House exhibition was the Nelson Gallery, in Kansas City of all places, which was loaning objects the equal of any other museum's. It had opened only two years earlier.

Remarkable effort and suspense-filled drama went into this accomplishment. With his trusted number-one boy, Hui-jung, Laurence Sickman literally walked over much of northern China, weighed down with a clumsy Zeiss view camera to record the images at famous and obscure sites. It is safe to say that, aside from Osvald Sirén, no one else outside China has seen as much Buddhist sculpture as he has.

Few have had the opportunity or courage to purchase a Hsü Tao-ning, a scroll that is easily the greatest Northern Sung landscape handscroll to have survived. It came at midnight, announced by the knocking of a runner from some princely palace who refused to identify either himself or his master. But the master needed money — cash, in silver, and right away. One suspects a losing streak at mahjong. Another scroll, of minor interest, came with the prize. It was both, or nothing. The Hsü Tao-ning now rests in the Nelson Gallery as one of the greatest artistic treasures of all mankind.

In 1933 Sickman finally met his employers and saw the newly finished museum for which he had been building a collection. An offer of employment as Curator of Oriental Art ensued, thus inaugurating an association of more than forty years.

The war brought Sickman back to China as a major in the Air Force attached to aerial bombing intelligence. Being an alumnus of Harvard, he recalls the perverse humor to be found in having bombed the hell out of

Yale-in-China, which had by then become a Japanese headquarters.

Just two days after the Japanese surrender, his colonel and he took a plane to Peking to confiscate Japanese intelligence documents. Had the Japanese command in Peking even heard of the surrender? Would the B-25 be shot out of the sky or allowed to land? It must have been both astonishing and immensely reassuring to see the Japanese general staff lined up on the apron ready to surrender China to the ranking American officer. The return flight to Chungking included a bomb bay packed with surrendered *samurai* swords and masterpieces by Shen Chou, Wen Cheng-ming and Lu Chih, the nucleus of the Nelson Gallery's collection of Ming painting, all purchased with funds hurriedly and irregularly borrowed from a suitcase containing \$250,000 belonging to the Quartermaster Corps.

Laurence Sickman was appointed Director of The Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum in 1953. He inherited an unfinished museum that was withdrawn, protective of its exclusiveness and wary of popular visitors. In the twenty-three years of Sickman's directorship the museum grew, not only to one of national importance but also beyond that to one playing an international role....

The profession of Oriental art studies has also been a principal beneficiary of Laurence Sickman's care and devotion. He was among the small group of dedicated founders of the Association for Asian Studies. Perhaps no other single volume has enjoyed the level of influence in the field as *The Art and Architecture of China*, which he wrote with A. C. Soper. It is a classic.

Selfless devotion to the museum profession and to Far Eastern studies has led Laurence Sickman to serve on virtually every professional committee and foundation panel in the field. His sound counsel and "no-nonsense" attitudes have contributed immeasurably to the strength and solid foundations on which these two professions now rest.

But more than any other factor, it has been personal contact and the force of personality that have made him one of the most respected, revered men in his profession. Few there are in this field whose lives have not been touched by Laurence Sickman. Many even owe their positions to his support. It is surely the mark of a very civilized and sophisticated man to seek out and support strong and able younger people without jealousy or fear. In this respect, he has often remarked, "If the next generation is not better than I am, then we are moving backwards. What is really the important point?"

If Fate brought Laurence Sickman those things he sought, then Kansas City, its Nelson Gallery and the Oriental art profession might look to Fate for having sought a Laurence Sickman for them. None is quite imaginable without him.



Laurence Sickman (left) en route to China, 1930.

LAURENCE SICKMAN

in his own words

I. Harvard-Yenching Fellowship

(excerpted from a taped interview with

Michael Churchman, December 2, 1982)

After graduating from Harvard in June, 1930, Laurence Sickman received the second fellowship for study in China awarded under a new program of the Harvard-Yenching Institute in Peking.

[The terms of the Harvard-Yenching Fellowship were] all — very happily — extremely loose. This is not the case anymore. It's almost unprecedented to renew fellowships for four or five years. But they had relatively few applicants, you see, at that time because there were so few centers for Far Eastern studies, and so they renewed my fellowship. Other people who came later were John King Fairbank, who is now head of the great institute at Harvard; the Ambassador to Japan, Ed Reischauer; and then Dr. Herlee Creel who was one of the great students of early Chinese philosophy. There was quite a little group [as well as] quite a number of European students.... During those years I traveled considerably through North China, not South China very much, taking maybe as much as six weeks at a time for a long trip.

In Peking Sickman took no formal graduate courses. In addition to lessons in Chinese he studied Sanskrit.

[I had as a tutor] a very scholarly German baron, Baron de Staël-Holstein, who had become associated with the Harvard-Yenching Institute. He was a specialist on Tibetan Lamaism, and he had taught at Harvard as a guest lecturer. He was a cousin of Count Keyserling — all those Baltic barons are related, you know — and descended from Madame de Staël. A very eccentric person altogether. He had been at Harvard and had Harvard connections and then went back to Peking to pursue his own studies there. Harvard then had me take courses with him. [We used] a parallel text in Sanskrit and Chinese. It was a Chinese translation of a Sanskrit text, so we read the two of them. There was one Chinese also taking the course. Baron de Staël was my only contact with Harvard, and he was by no means exacting. The time would come for the renewal of my fellowship, and I would go in to see Baron de Staël, and he said, "Well, how are you getting along, and what are your interests?" and finally, "Wouldn't you like to stay a little longer?" and so I did.

After settling into life in Peking and taking lessons with Chinese tutors and with Baron de Staël, Sickman was visited by Langdon Warner.



A view of Laurence Sickman's house in Peking, 1930's.

[At Harvard] I took all the courses I could in Far Eastern fine arts. They were taught by a man named Langdon Warner. I got to know Langdon Warner very well, and he was helpful to me [in] getting the fellowship. In 1930, when the trustees of the Nelson Trust were faced with the problem of making a collection of fine arts to fill this big building that was started, they appointed a European and an Oriental adviser for acquisitions. Langdon Warner from Harvard was appointed their Oriental adviser. [Warner] was going to Japan and China, so the Trustees gave him some funds with which to acquire works he thought would be suitable for the Museum. When he came back to Peking in January of '31 I had already been there almost half a year, and while I knew very little about the dealers because I hadn't been associated with them at all, still I did know something about the principal dealers in antiquities in Peking. I went around with Mr. Warner to all these places and had a very interesting experience. He acquired a few things and a few paintings. Then when he [went home] he had several thousand dollars left, which he left with me. He deposited [the money] in the Chase Manhattan Bank in Peking. If I saw anything interesting, I was to send him photographs, and he would cable back whether to buy it or not. So for a while we did that. Awkward! Lots of time passed. So finally [the Trustees] gave me more or less *carte blanche* to buy. With major acquisitions, I would still consult Mr. Warner, until he resigned.

[The early 1930's were the] last really good years for the purchase of Chinese art. There were a number of factors. One was the building of Chinese railroads. For example, in Honan Province in the valley of the Yellow River, the Chinese built a long railroad that went absolutely parallel with the Yellow River. That is the heartland of Chinese ancient culture. They cut through hundreds and hundreds of graves. One doesn't like to call the Chinese grave robbers. I prefer the phrase, 'liberated by the local gentry.' In any case, the local gentry were extremely active during those years. They may have been just a simple farmer or a landowner, or in very many cases, a government official. Then these local gentry discovered the tombs of some of the earliest recorded Chinese emperors of the second millenium B.C., and great objects came from there.

'Liberated' objects from the provinces and objects which the old aristocracy were obliged to dispose of found their way to the art dealers.

There were two great centers, Shanghai and Peking, and probably a dozen very active dealers in Peking. All these people had permanent agents in the larger cities of the interior. These agents would be on the lookout constantly. It was a regular cloak-and-dagger business, of course. [There was] stiff competition among scouts, and then if a local official got hold of a certain number of things, he would know which dealers would be able to handle an object of that quality. These objects were never shown in [the dealers'] shops. They had

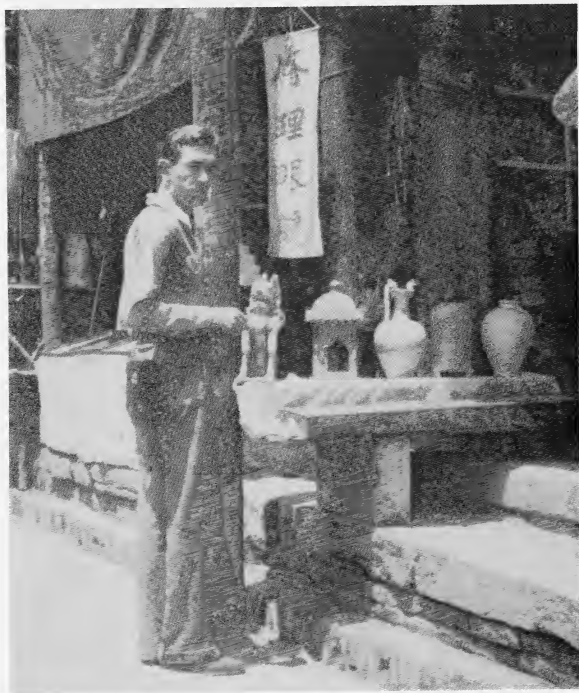
runners that they would send to your house and they'd say, "Oh, we just got something I think you might be interested in." The shops always had a room in front full of porcelains and jade and knick-knacks, and then two or three rooms behind would be the inner sanctum of the dealer where you would go and be shown the important works. Unless you had pretty close contact with the dealers, you wouldn't get anywhere. Of course there were a number of buyers at that time in Peking. There was a man named C. T. Loo who was the largest dealer in the Western world — he was the Duveen of Chinese art in the Western world — and then a Japanese firm called Yamanaka. There was also a German firm, and there was an agent buying for the King of Sweden and another agent buying for British collectors.

You would be shown an object and the dealer would ask you three or four times what he expected to get for it, and then you would make a very low offer, and then he would come down maybe a tenth. So you would dicker back and forth and back and forth until you got to the point where you would offer just what you wanted to pay for it. The object would be worth just so much to you, and you weren't going to pay any more for it. And then you would go out. Then at that moment when you left, the dealer might say, 'OK, fine, we'll settle.' On the other hand, he might not. In that case, he would then call in someone from Yamanaka and then go through the whole process again. If Yamanaka would not bid higher than you did, he would still wait and he would get yet another agent, let's say from Mr. Loo, so you would all see the object and all make an offer of what you were willing to pay for it. Then he might get the runner to come around and say, 'Wouldn't you like to look at this thing again,' and then you knew that you were highest bidder. But if you saw something you just had to have, you just stayed there, maybe three or four hours, drinking a gallon of tea, because you knew it was of such quality that it would be snapped up immediately by anyone else who saw it. You paid the maximum you could afford. It was a wonderful game.

I had great assistance from a German there, Dr. Otto Burchard, who was a Ph.D. from Heidelberg. Dr. Burchard lived in Peking and was a dealer in Far Eastern art. He had a gallery in Berlin and an agent in New York. He preferred to deal with me directly because both his galleries in Berlin and New York didn't have the clientele for very, very expensive objects. He was a great help to me. He had a real underground in Peking, and he would hear about things. I was supposed to be a student with a limited amount of time, not just running around Peking. Burchard would make the contact and then he would say, 'Come on now, let's go down and see what this guy's got. I saw it yesterday and I think it's just what you need.'

You couldn't ask the dealer to hold the things for you. On several oc-

casions, when the thing was very good indeed, Burchard would buy it himself and hold it until we heard from Mr. Warner and then he would send it. If Warner didn't buy it (and most often he didn't — he had a very strange eye), Burchard would send it to his New York agent who would sell it. Some of the things that I wanted very badly Burchard bought. Two of them are in St. Louis, to my utter chagrin and disgust.



Laurence Sickman in the ancient city of Loyang, China, 1932. The ceramics displayed on the stall are from the Han to the Tang Dynasties.



LAURENCE SICKMAN in his own words

II. The Last Emperor P'u-yi

(excerpted from a taped interview with
Michael Churchman, January 14, 1983)

The ex-emperor, that is the Emperor P'u-yi (reign title Hsüan t'ung), had been turned out of the palace in '24. He had taken up [residence in] a house in Tientsin with a great many of his staff . . . When the Emperor abdicated [1913] he was left in the possession of all the Imperial palace and all that was in it. That was very strange. The only comparison would be, let us say, that when the last of the Hapsburg emperors abdicated [he could keep] the Hofburg and everything in it and all the holdings of the Hapsburg family as his personal property. So during that period the Emperor P'u-yi knew, and his advisers knew, that the agreement wouldn't last. During that period he kept sending paintings out to his brother who lived in Tientsin, generally handscrolls. He would send out a few all the time — 1,800 to 2,000 paintings. Then when he was finally turned out by some of the warlords and had to go to Tientsin [1924], he left everything behind — thousands of objects. But he had the paintings.

Of course the Japanese were keeping him on ice to be emperor of Manchukuo. The Japanese military already had this idea of building an empire in Manchuria. He was a Manchu, you see, so they thought they would make him emperor. He had a big house in the Japanese concession in Tientsin. He had a nice English lady who was his tutor, and she met Langdon Warner and said she would introduce him to the Emperor and to the house. [She indicated the Emperor] would like to sell some things because he needed the cash. The introduction was made, and we went and saw a number of scrolls. He had a curator retainer — a whole staff of old Manchu retainers. P'u-yi wasn't interested in paintings. He had just bought that damn new motorcycle, and he would go out and try his motorcycle and then come back in and look over our shoulder and then go back to his motorcycle.

We bought three or four paintings at that time directly. They were the first paintings we acquired — directly from the Emperor.

Opposite: Ch'en Shun (1483-1544), *Lotus* (detail), Ming dynasty, color on paper (31-135/34). This handscroll was acquired directly from the Emperor P'u-yi by Laurence Sickman in 1931.



Buddhist Stele, Northern Ch'i dynasty, 569 A.D., gray limestone with polychrome (32-52).

BUDDHIST STELE

by Wai-kam Ho¹

In the year 569 A.D., under the rule of the Northern Ch'i Dynasty, a Buddhist priest by the name of Tao-lin was traveling through the mountainous country of Shansi Province and stopped in his wanderings at a little town called Ch'ang-tzu. Here it would seem he stayed and preached, and probably as a memorial to his visit, as a monument of faith on the part of his congregation, and for the greater glory of the doctrine, a stone stele (7' 7½" high) was proposed to be erected in the courtyard of the local temple. Funds were raised from two hundred devotees who lived in the district, stone was selected and cut from the nearby mountains, and an artist was summoned from a neighboring city. Upon the completion of its construction, the names of all the subscribers were added on the back and sides of the stele to bear witness to this act of faith and to sing their eternal praise for Sakyamuni Buddha, the main figure on the stele, and the center of their adoration. On the top of the stele are highly stylized representations of mountains and trees. The scene is of the Vulture Peak where the Buddha preaches his great sermons to all heavenly beings. As the Buddha is about to speak, suddenly there rises from the earth to the midst of the sky a stupa of stupendous size and magnificence . . . and from the midst of the shrine there comes a mighty voice saying, "Excellent! Excellent! World-honored Sakyamuni!" Great excitement prevails for this is the voice of Prabhutaratna, a Buddha who has been extinct for countless aeons, who promised to reappear whenever the Wonderful Doctrine of the Lotus should be preached.

Almost fourteen hundred years have passed. On March 23, 1933, probably on the same dusty dirt road traveled by the itinerant priest Tao-lin, and against the same bleak and barren landscape of the poor backcountry of southern Shansi, there came a young American scholar groping his way to find the little temple. According to his field notes, he got up very early in a small roadside inn in the morning.

¹Laurence Sickman Curator of Oriental Art, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

After breakfast left Ch'ang-tze in a small cart together with Hazelton [a local missionary] and my Chinese assistant Hui-jung. We traveled over a narrow cart road with deep ruts, much mud, and went due west toward Shih-che-chen. Went through Shih-che-chen by mistake, retraced our steps and turned to the south of the east gate of Shih-che-chen and continued south and crossed a small stream, climbed the bank on the other side and came to Ta-nan-shih. The temple of Ch'ien-fo-ssu is the first temple as one comes into the village. . . . We were told by an old man who lived in the temple that formerly the other stele [now in the Nelson Gallery] stood there [on the left of the altar] together with its base. It had, he said, been taken and cut in two pieces in the 19th year of the Republic [1930] by troops of General Yen Hsi-shan. When asked at what time the temple was built, he answered at once "in the 5th year of T'ien-t'ung [569 A.D.]"

The young American scholar of course was none other than Laurence Sickman.

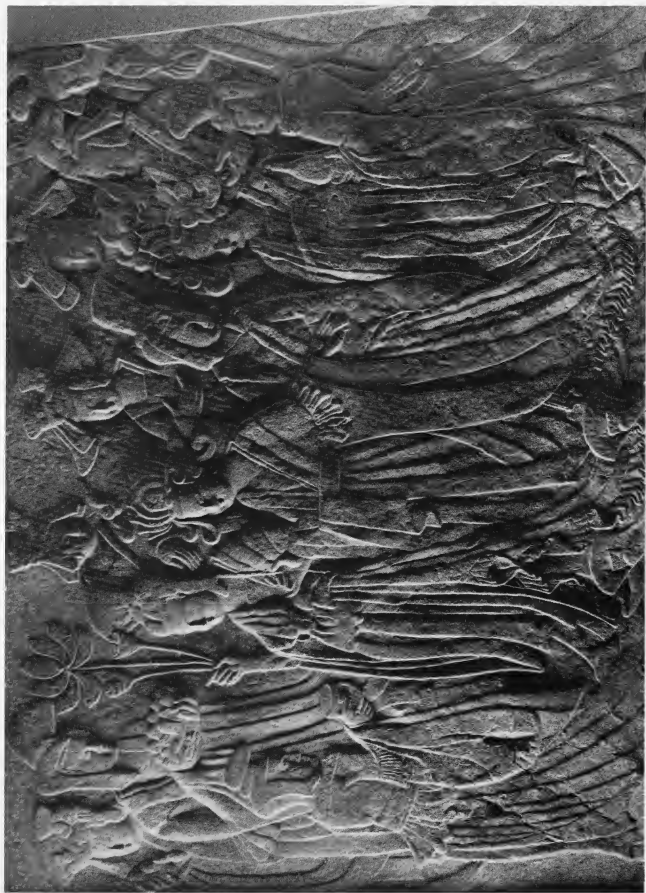
It is important to point out that Laurence Sickman did not make that difficult trip in 1933 to search for the stele (which, by that time, without its base, had already been acquired by the Nelson Gallery). Although by using the information supplied by the old man in the temple he was eventually able to hunt down the missing base from a Tientsin art dealer, he traveled to Shansi for a very different purpose. It would seem he wished to retrace the footsteps of the Buddhist monk Tao-lin to that predestined village, to acquire a personal feel and firsthand knowledge of the time, the place, and the people who more than a thousand years ago created such a splendid work of art in that humble village.

Laurence Sickman was one of the very few western pioneers in the study of Chinese art who had the open mind, the humility, and the true compassion to assimilate the best of the two cultural traditions. On the one hand, he explored the vast frontier and uncharted territories of Chinese art with the same zeal, intellectual penchant, and scholarly persistence as Aurel Stein or Von Le Coq in their Central Asian adventures. His dramatic encounters in Peking and on other excursions through the Yellow River valley brought such great masterpieces as Hsü Tao-ning's *Fishermen* scroll to the Nelson-Atkins collection. On the other hand, Laurence Sickman did not merely raid the exotic surface of the Orient in the manner of an old China hand. He learned to look at things Chinese with the nostalgia of a native son and to breathe in the history and life of the land with the secret heartbeat of the civilization. His Chinese con-

nection was a day-to-day love affair between two seemingly incompatible worlds — the East and the West, the scholarly and the popular, the aristocratic and the plebeian, the rendezvous in the elegant garden of a Manchu prince and the endless search in the back-alley bazaar in the old capitals of Kaifeng and Loyang. Curatorial high romance went hand in hand with bookish toil and down-to-earth detective work. What makes the Nelson-Atkins collection of Chinese art preeminent among its Western peers are not only its scope and depth and persistently high quality, not only its incomparably superb representations of ancient ritual and funerary art in bronze, jade, lacquer, and ceramics, its comprehensive collections of Buddhist painting and sculpture in every format and medium, its large and outstanding assembly of Ming and Ch'ing furniture, and Sung and Yuan painting, its Ching Hao and Li Cheng, Ma Yuan and Hsia Kuei, not only these high and fine arts; but more surprisingly, unknown to most visitors, are the numerous little treasures in Museum storage accumulated by Laurence Sickman during his Peking days that will surely provoke fond memories and give great joy to every student, whether he is an art historian, a Sinologist, or simply someone who knows and loves the old country. He was the only serious scholar, for example, as far as I am aware, who took genuine pleasure in such scholarly knick-knacks as a complete paraphernalia for cricket fights with the same eloquence and "*t'ung-hsin*" (child's mind) as a seventeenth century late Ming literati. Who else but Laurence Sickman would have had, in those chaotic pre-war years, the tranquility of mind, the intuition and knowledge to spend money and time, beyond his official duties, to build a collection of early Chinese woodblock prints ranging from the *Ten Bamboo Studio* to the door gods from Yang-liu-ch'ing, or a collection of artists' sketchbooks, or a unique and enormously important collection of ink rubbings from Buddhist stone engravings not to be found even in China itself?

So the Buddhist stele from a little village in Shansi Province will stay here in Kansas City for the education and pleasure of our future generations — all because a young American scholar had the foresight to answer the call from an ancient civilization:

"Excellent! Excellent! World-honored Sakyamuni!"



THE EMPRESS AS DONOR WITH ATTENDANTS

by Laurence Sickman

With angry feelings somewhat akin to those of the Greek government about the Elgin marbles, officials of the People's Republic of China have blamed Westerners for looting the Buddhist cave temples at Lung-men in Honan province. Laurence Sickman visited the site in 1931 and stayed more than a week, causing rubbings to be made which are now the only record of some of the principal monuments. He described in an article for The Kansas City Star, January 29, 1967, the subsequent fate of the cave sculptures.

[When I visited] in 1931 there were no signs of recent destruction, although there were many losses due to the vicissitudes of time and wanton defacement. However, later in the winter of that same year, I saw on the Peking art market fragments of early Buddhist sculpture which undoubtedly had come from the Lung-men caves. At that time there were found in Peking shops later Buddhist sculptures in wood and clay from ruined or deserted temples, many of which had recently been converted into public schools. Sculpture of this kind was one thing, but these fragments hacked and chipped from the living rock of the great Lung-men caves was nothing but sheer vandalism.

In December of 1931 I brought this state of affairs at Lung-men to the attention of a member of the Chinese Committee for the Preservation of Antiquities, who replied by letter, "The authorities are taking steps to stop the ruthless destruction at the source and I am particularly grateful to you for having informed me about it."

My next visit to Lung-men was in March, 1933, when it appeared that the situation had altered alarmingly. In many of the earliest caves, those from the years 500 to 525, heads of images had disappeared and in places whole figures had been chipped from the walls and niches. A large section of the empress relief and several isolated heads were gone.

A secretary from the office of the provincial government at Loyang had accompanied me. We discussed the damage at length and he took

Opposite: *The Empress as Donor with Attendants*. Northern Wei Dynasty (386-535). About 522. Dark limestone with traces of color. 6'4"x 9'1". 40-38. From the Pin-yang cave at the Buddhist cave-chapels of Lung-men, Honan.

voluminous notes. About that time the late Mrs. William Crozier, an American from Philadelphia, at my suggestion, offered to finance a body of troops or police to guard the caves, but for a variety of reasons the authorities found such action impractical.

On my third and last visit to Lung-men in 1934, I found that the bas-relief of the empress and her court was almost completely gone. It must be borne in mind that destruction of this kind was to some extent made possible by the political situation. The authority of the central government was not as strong in outlying provinces as could be wished; the Japanese had invaded Manchuria, set up their puppet state of Manchukuo, were threatening North China, and in fact, in 1937 occupied Peking. It was a period of great political tensions.

My inquiries disclosed the fragments of the empress relief were not concentrated in the hands of one owner but were scattered, some in Peking, others in Cheng-chou, Kaifeng, and Shanghai. Later one fragment was found in Germany. Since the relief not only was gone from its proper site but was in danger of being completely dispersed and lost forever as a unified composition, we decided that the best course would be to assemble as many of the fragments as possible and attempt to reconstruct the sculpture. Some of the fragments had been put together by the dealers into relatively large sections, but much was in the form of chips of varying sizes.

The gathering together of as many fragments as could be found required several years, and it was not until the winter of 1939-40 that we began on the reconstruction here. Fortunately photographs, slides and the full-scale paper rubbings of the relief were available as guides. Missing areas in the drapery were filled in with plaster, connecting the folds and making the composition intelligible. Only one complete head never could be found and had to be restored, that of the figure on the lower left.

In all this reconstruction work, the sculptor, Wallace Rosenbauer of the Kansas City Art Institute, gave invaluable assistance. The vandalism caused, of course, irreparable damage, not just to the great cave temple but to the relief itself as well. Although the countless fragments have been re-assembled with every care possible, still the work is rather like a person who has suffered a very severe accident. The skill of the facial surgeon may make him recognizable to his friends, but he is never quite the same. After two years of labor, the sculpture of the empress and her court was first presented to the public with the opening of the new room of Chinese sculpture at the gallery in 1941.

Sculptures from the Lung-men caves are now in many museums of the world, Boston and New York among others, and there are numerous collections in Japan. The companion relief of the emperor and his court is

in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. Works of art throughout history have often had eventful and frequently tragic careers. In the recent book, *Langdon Warner Through His Letters*, edited by Theodore Bowie, Warner, one-time adviser to the Nelson Gallery, writes:

"If we are ever criticized for buying those chips, the love and the labor and the dollars spent on assembling them should silence all criticism. That in itself is a service to the cause of China."

And yet, all who are concerned with the cultural tradition of China would far rather wish that the relief of the empress were still in far-off Honan province, an integral part of the Pin-yang cave for which it was made.

Laurence Sickman's role saved The Empress as Donor with Attendants for posterity. But because of sensitive Chinese feelings about the Lang-men sculpture, it was decided to erect a temporary wall in front of The Empress as Donor with Attendants in 1975 at the time Chinese officials came to The Nelson Gallery for the opening of The Exhibition of Archaeological Finds of the People's Republic of China.

REMINISCENCES OF LAURENCE SICKMAN

by Sir Harold Acton

[In Peking] I met several Americans who surprised me with their profound intuitive understanding of Chinese art. Among these the finest connoisseur was Laurence Sickman, whose culture was entirely Chinese though he had been born in Denver, Colorado. Some of the most splendid moments of the day were when Laurence walked in with some treasure he had discovered, and he was constantly discovering treasures, from Chou bronzes to jade cicadas, for the fantastically fortunate Kansas City museum. I marvelled at his integrity. Anybody else with so personal a passion for these things would have appropriated them for himself, and how could Kansas City be any the wiser? In his hands they glowed like sleeping princesses at the wakening touch of a Prince Charming, and he led them as brides to the altar of his charming house in Hsieh Ho Hutung. I was often privileged to be the best man at these nuptials. But after a brief honeymoon, they were sent to sleep again behind the glass cases of the gallery in Missouri.¹

In describing his house in Peking Acton wrote:

Everything was perfectly proportioned; every table, picture, vase, and bowl fitted comfortably into the general design, and I had chosen these objects and bargained for them, over innumerable cups of tea, one by one, during pleasurable walks and excursions with Laurence Sickman.²

After World War II Acton visited the United States, staying with relations in Chicago and visiting Kansas City. His memoirs continue:

Though [Laurence Sickman] had not yet been appointed director of the Kansas City gallery he had built up its collection of Chinese art since he had gone to Peking from Harvard. His understanding of Chinese aesthetic values was unique and he was able to communicate it to others. I can only compare the delight of his companionship with that of mountaineering minus the fatigue, for we seemed to climb peak after peak and from every summit there was a grander view of other summits with fertile valleys in between. To look at any scroll or artifact with him was to breathe a purer air. And a large proportion of the scrolls we examined depicted mountain panoramas, painted

¹Sir Harold Acton, *Memoirs of an Aesthete*, London: Methuen & Co., 1948; pp. 323-324.

²*ibid.*, p. 351

as only the Chinese could paint them, range after soaring range, vast, bold, abrupt, often misty and cloud-capped, suggesting dizzy heights and depths and boundless space beyond. Nothing seemed too far away for the eye to follow: fresh worlds appeared beyond gorgeous pageants of cloud. Minute passing figures reduced man to insignificance.

No non-Chinese, and not many Chinese connoisseurs, had Larry Sickman's unerring sense of style, form, quality, in Chinese painting — apart from ceramics and the various crafts. Perhaps because I had known him in Peking, I enjoyed the illusion of being there still when I visited him in Kansas City. The Oriental section of the Nelson Gallery, which had cost a mere fraction of the European section, was the best arranged I had seen. Larry had been mainly responsible for the choice of its contents, from the smallest jade pendant of the Chou Dynasty to the rhythmical relief of an empress and her attendants from Lung-men in Honan, about A.D. 522, a tapestry in limestone which had to be fitted together from fragments like a jigsaw puzzle by Larry himself. Being so young a gallery, first opened in December, 1933, the curators had learned from others' mistakes. The lighting, cleverly concealed, was soft and natural, and the Chou bronzes and Tang ceramics were grouped against fine-grained woods on suitably proportioned pedestals. The painted handscrolls, some from the ex-Emperor P'u-yi's collection, were of superlative quality, and I spent many a quiet hour in admiration of Chên Tao-fu's *Life and Death of the Lotus* and a range of mountains attributed to Hsü Tao-ning. Larry allowed me to unfold many others which were not on display: he was a perfect Chinese host of the good old days that are now condemned as wicked.

The Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum was situated in a restful park of twenty acres and my host lived near by with his mother, whose passion for Peking kept her youthful. She had stayed on there alone till the outbreak of war and she kept in touch with all her old Pekingese friends and followed their vicissitudes with the keenest concern. It was almost as if she lost a son when her faithful servant Hui-jung, a handsome Manchu, was kidnapped and shot by the Japanese. Looking at Chinese objects by day and talking of our Chinese memories by night made us relive that extraordinary period which had left an indefinable yet indelible influence on each of us.³

³Sir Harold Acton, *Memoirs of an Aesthete 1939-1969*. New York: The Viking Press, 1970, pp. 220-221.

HAROLD ACTON IN PEKING¹

By Laurence Sickman

Peking, in the years I shared with Harold, was the only city in the world where physical and social traditions a millennium old had survived into the twentieth century. There were massive walls and the iron-bound gates were still closed at dusk and opened at dawn for the farmers and their produce. Domestic houses and the courtyards were all walled, the main buildings facing south, and like the vast Imperial Palace, oriented on a north-south axis to insure cosmic harmony. There were guilds of craftsmen and such specific market areas as the winding street of the famous Liu-li-ch'ang where dealers in antiquities, painting, calligraphy, books, and such scholar's equipment as ink, fine paper and seals had their shops. The street was the favorite haunt of scholars, writers, poets and painters. This was the literati class, *wen-jen*, who have set the tone of Chinese cultural life for millennia, and who, as the 'intellectuals' of a new order, remained a vital factor in the social structure of Peking. It was, I believe, the overall *ambiance* of traditional Peking that Harold readily responded to, and understood better, than any other foreigner I knew in China.

Harold's natural affinity with poets, painters, writers and scholars assured his entry into the intellectual ferment of the New China, centered in Peking University. There the Pai-hua movement, use of the spoken language in literature, was centered, and, for the first time, an intense interest in Occidental literature.

Through his association with the university, Harold enjoyed an active participation in the current intellectual life of Peking where he made so many friends among the young writers.

Peking, in those years was also the central art market in China, to my deep satisfaction, and the home of its two leading painters, Prince P'u Ju and Ch'ï Pai-shih.

Harold and I often visited P'u Ju, a Prince of the Imperial house, who epitomized the old school, *ch'iu-pai*, in manner, speech and devotion to the arts. His meticulous landscapes in the styles of past dynasties and his

¹*Oxford China and Italy: Writings in Honour of Sir Harold Acton on his Eightieth Birthday*. Edited by Edward Chaney and Neil Ritchie, London: Thames and Hudson, 1984, pp. 69-70.

superb calligraphy made him, in my opinion, the best Chinese artist of the mid-twentieth century. In the strongest possible contrast, Ch'í Pai-shih, a self-styled rustic, swept his ink-charged brush about with vigour and abandon, producing paintings of chickens and their brood, shrimps, fish and trailing vines. Some came off very well and some not. Harold in his memoirs describes a visit to this rare expressionist and comments on the vast number of fakes produced by his students, a few of which I unwittingly acquired.

In 1936 my new duties at a new museum forced me to return to America before having an opportunity to visit Harold in his beautiful and traditional house, No. 2, Kung Hsien Hutung. Some of the collection housed there I have seen, and other treasured objects I have only heard about. There were strangely shaped, gnarled pieces of ancient wood and bamboo carvings of the form of brush-holders, arm-rests for calligraphers and Taoist immortals, all suited to the scholar's desk. A collection of bronze mirrors illustrated the fact that no other people in the world have lavished so much talent and ingenuity as have the Chinese on decoration limited to the circle.

I am sure the paintings and calligraphy of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century literati poet-painters held an important place among Harold's collection. On my desk at the moment is a lovely album by the poet-painter, Hua Yen, dated 1717, and which Harold has generously given my museum. The ten leaves of delicate landscapes, painted in dry ink, are matched, on the facing page, by a poem in the artist's elegant calligraphy. Such an album, peculiarly Chinese, is a personal thing, of a kind the Chinese would bring out, as Harold would, to share and enjoy with a group of sympathetic friends.

One is tempted to pen a futile and long lament over the traditional Peking that is gone, and gone forever. But it is far more rewarding to share with friends the varied memories of those truly perfect years.

Thos. H. Benton
Chilmark, Massachusetts
(Island of Martha's Vineyard)

Aug 16 - 56

Mr. Lawrence Dickman
Director - Nelson - Rockhill Museum
Kansas City, Mo.

Dear Larry —

I have had the pleasure of going
through the English edition of your
book on Chinese art, not thoroughly
as yet, but sufficiently to feel like
congratulating you on a fine clear
reading job.

Best luck in the work.

Sincerely,
yours
Tom

Thos. H. Benton

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